# ASTERIX THE GAUL

It is not very often that the *Bulletin of The New York Academy of Medicine* or any other medical periodical has occasion to notice the pictorial volumes which we Americans–somewhat to the mystification of Europeans, Asians, and Africans–designate as *comic books*. We are apt to admit, grudgingly and inattentively, that this species of composition reflects, with varying distortion, the appearance, habits, behavior, morality, and fantasies of our times, but we are reluctant to regard it as art or as literature. The comic book is out-of-bounds, substandard, déclassé.

Yet this pariah has noble ancestors. Without laboring the question of genealogy, it is apparent that the comic cartoon, issued singly or serially, is traceable to Hogarth and Rowlandson of the 18th century and to the political and social draughtsmen of the 19th century such as Goya, Gavarni, and Daumier. Much of the more recent development can be credited, or debited, to the United States. Indeed, we have sometimes tended to feel that the comic cartoon is a North American cultural product, exported to Europe and imitated there. This erroneous opinion perhaps owes its origin to the fact that European immigrants are commonly puzzled by the "comic" section of the American newspaper.

It is now evident that in the writing of comic books the Europeans have equaled or outdone us. In 1961 a French draughtsman, Albert Uderzo, joined a writer, René Goscinny, in composing *Astérix le Gaulois*, the first of a series which now includes a dozen volumes, such as *Le Tour de Gaule*, *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques*, and *Le Bouclier Arverne*.*

The principal scene of action is set in Gaul in 50 B.C. Contrary to the untruthful statements which Julius Caesar made in his *Gallic War*, not all of Gaul has been subjugated by the Romans. A small Gallic village remains unconquered. It is under close observation by the Roman garrisons of Laudanum, Aquarium, Babaorum (baba au rhum), and Petibonum (petit bonhomme). By analogy with Vercingetorix the Gallic heroes of the picture narratives have been given names ending in *ix*, such as: Astérix (Figure 1), the energetic little warrior; his close

*The Astérix books are published in Paris by Dargaud. Volumes issued in the original French and distributed in England contain explanatory four-page leaflets published by the Brockhampton Press of Leicester, England.

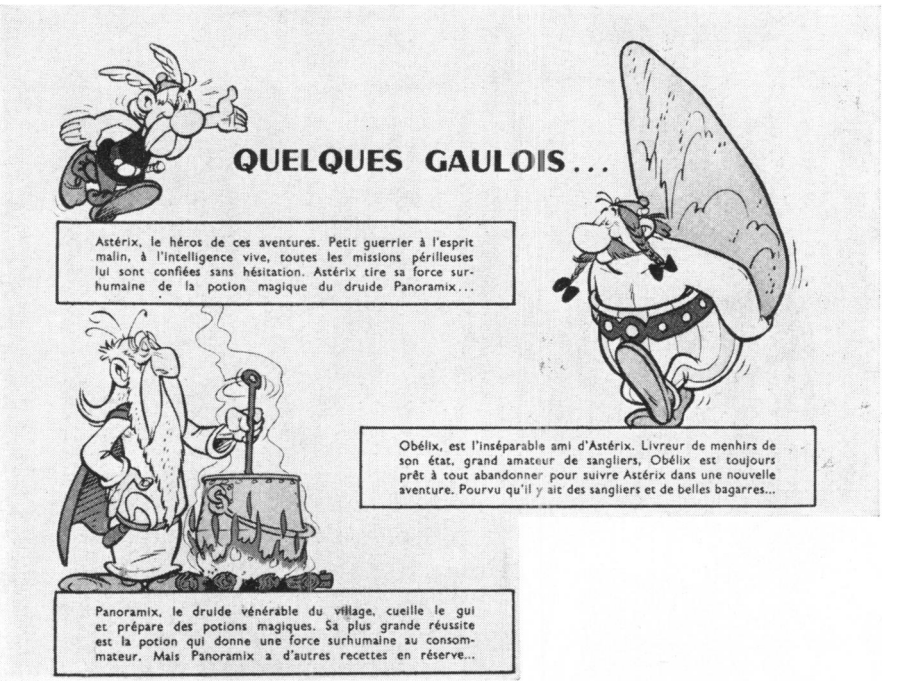


Fig. 1. Principal characters in the Astérix series. Reproduced by permission of the publisher, Dargaud S.A., of Paris.

friend the gigantic Obélix, a maker of menhirs (megaliths); the druid Panoramix, who brews the magic potion that makes his fellow tribesmen invincible; and the intolerably cacophonous bard Assurancetourix (assurance tous risques, all-inclusive automobile insurance).

In *Astérix et Les Normands* we meet a surly long-haired Gallic "hippy," Goudurix (goût du risque, i.e., reckless), who is emotional and cowardly. He dances in an exotic manner and drives a very fast chariot. Also to be mentioned are Pneumatix the courier, named after the Paris postal system, and Idéfix (idée fixe), a tiny dog.

In the course of their colorful adventures our heroes encounter not only Julius Caesar—depicted as thin and hawknosed, unlike the familiar portrait sculptures of the Julian gens—but such imaginary Romans as Claudius Lapsus and Tullius Stratocumulus. In *Le Combat des Chefs* Latin is taught in the Ecole de Langues Vivantes by Professor Berlix.

Egyptians are depicted vividly in *Astérix et Cléopatre* and a Phoeni-

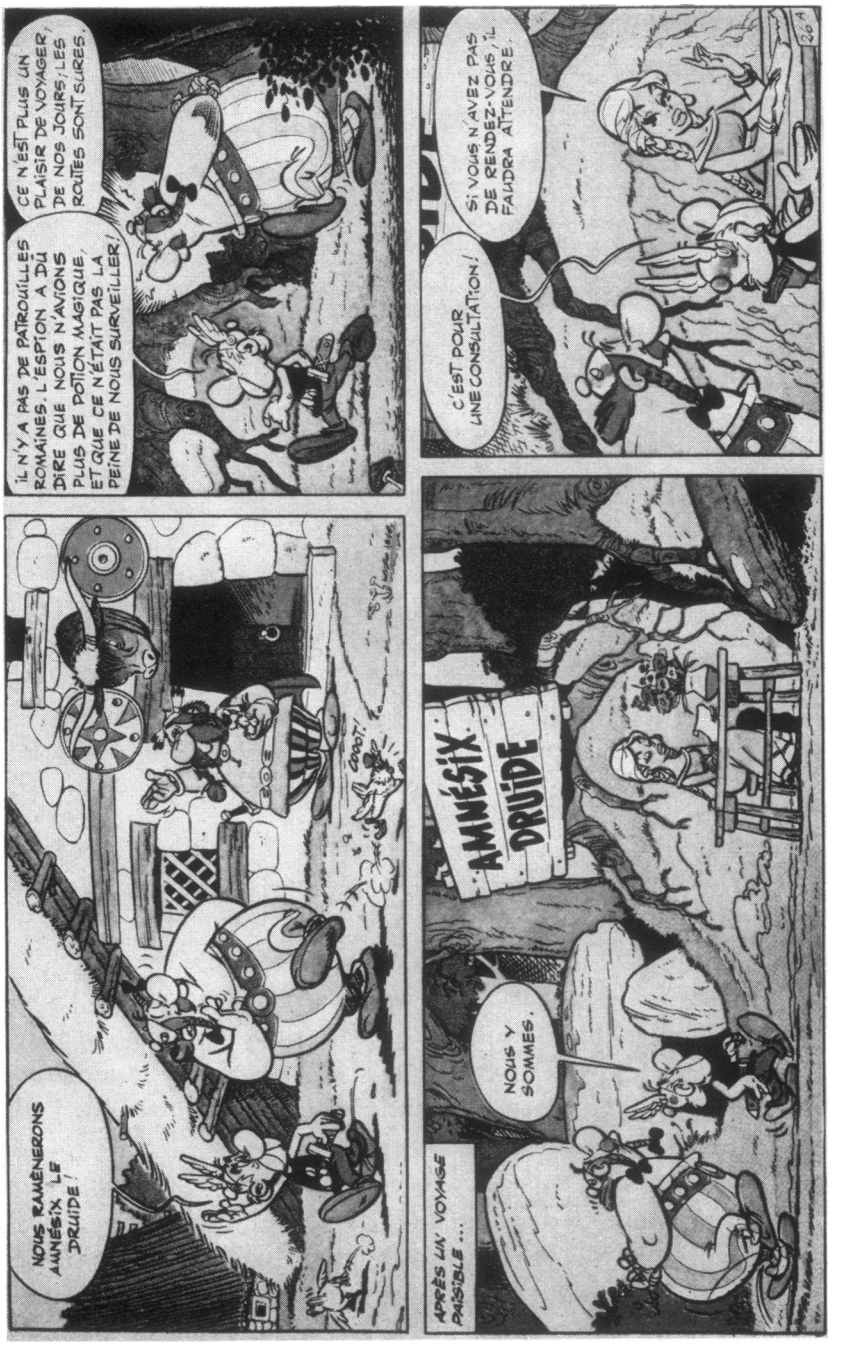


Fig. 2. The office of Amnésix, the Gallic druid-psychiatrist (50 B.C.). From *Le Combat des Chefs*. Reproduced by permission of the publisher, Dargaud S.A., of Paris.


Fig. 2 (continued).

cian merchant captain appears in *Astérix Gladiateur*. Gentlemanly tea-drinking Englishmen are satirized in *Astérix Chez les Bretons*.

The texts are replete with puns, quips, anachronisms, allusions, quotations, and parodies of a thousand kinds. Inevitably science and medicine have attracted the attention of the cartoonist.

In *Astérix Légionnaire* we see the physical examination of recruits in the Roman army. An Egyptian recruit speaks in hieroglyphics, while a Goth and an interpreter express themselves in Gothic type. The examining room is equipped with an eye chart and a mechanical examination table. On the wall are a trephine, two large knives, and a large forceps; these simultaneously suggest the surgical instruments found at Pompeii and the perforated skulls unearthed at various prehistoric sites.

In *Le Combat des Chefs*, Panoramix the druid is struck by a Celtic megalith and loses his memory. For treatment he is taken to Amnésix, a fellow druid who practices psychiatry. The alienist's office is a "hutte de consultation" (consultation hut) in the forest (Figure 2). Beyond the beauteous secretary are patients awaiting their turn: a huge barbarian who suffers from timidity (and whose words are in Gothic letters); a man who imagines himself to be a wild boar and sniffs in the grass of the forest; and a man who struts about in a Napoleonic uniform, his right hand thrust into his coat. "As for this man," says the receptionist, "nobody knows who he thinks he is." The results of the druidic psychotherapy are astounding and will not be disclosed in this review.

It is no wonder that the Astérix books are eagerly read by both adults and children, that they are used in the teaching of French, and that they have been translated into several European languages.

S.J.